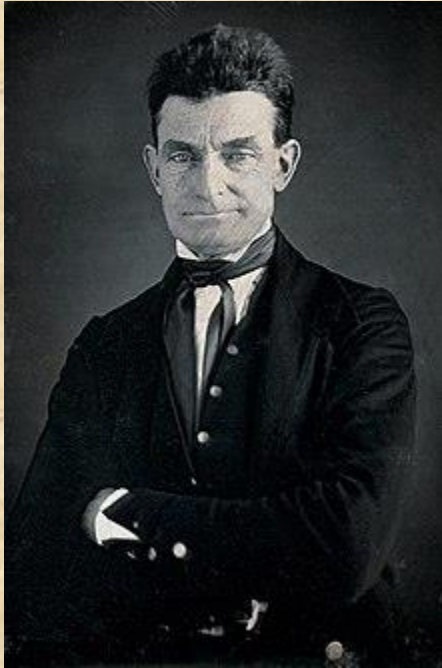
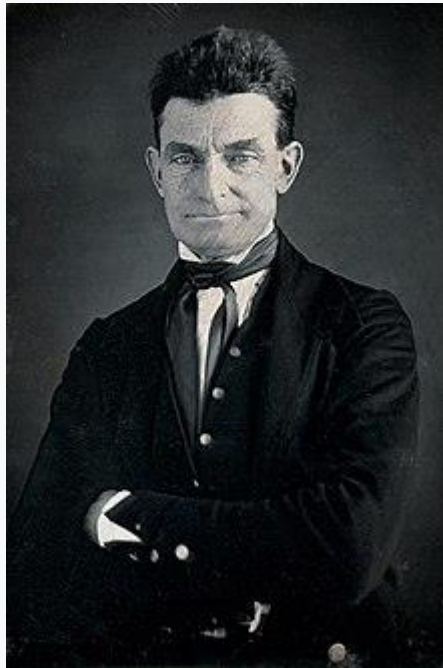


# John Brown



## John Brown






Brown in a photograph by [Augustus Washington](#), c. 1846–1847

### **Born**

May 9, 1800

[Torrington, Connecticut](#), U.S.

<b>Died</b>	December 2, 1859 (aged 59)  <a href="#">Charles Town, Virginia</a> (now <a href="#">West Virginia</a> ), U.S.
<b>Cause of death</b>	<a href="#">Execution by hanging</a>
<b>Resting place</b>	<a href="#">North Elba, New York</a> , U.S.  <a href="#">44.252240°N 73.971799°W</a>
<b>Monuments</b>	<a href="#">show</a>  Various:
<b>Known for</b>	Involvement in <a href="#">Bleeding Kansas</a> ; <a href="#">Raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia</a> .
<b>Movement</b>	<a href="#">Abolitionism</a>
<b>Criminal charge(s)</b>	<a href="#">Treason</a> against the <a href="#">Commonwealth of Virginia</a> ; <a href="#">murder</a> ; <a href="#">inciting slave insurrection</a>
<b>Spouses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>   Dianthe Lusk   (m. 1820; died 1832) </li> <li>   <a href="#">Mary Ann Day</a>   (m. 1833) </li> </ul>
<b>Children</b>	20, including <a href="#">John Jr.</a> , <a href="#">Owen</a> , and <a href="#">Watson</a>
<b>Parent</b>	<a href="#">Owen Brown</a> (father)
<b>Signature</b>	



*John Brown*

## Early life and family

### Family and childhood



The house in which Brown was born, in [Torrington, Connecticut](#), was photographed in 1896 and destroyed by fire in 1918.<sup>[16][17][18]</sup>

John Brown was born May 9, 1800, in [Torrington, Connecticut](#),<sup>[19]</sup> the son of [Owen Brown](#) (1771–1856)<sup>[9]</sup> and Ruth Mills (1772–1808).<sup>[20]</sup> Owen Brown's father was Capt. John Brown, of English descent, who died in the [Revolutionary War](#) in New York on September 3, 1776.<sup>[23]</sup> His mother, of Dutch and [Welsh](#) descent,<sup>[24]</sup> was the daughter of Gideon Mills, an officer in the Revolutionary Army.<sup>[23]</sup>

Although Brown described his parents as "poor but respectable" at some point,<sup>[22]</sup> Owen Brown became a leading and wealthy citizen of Hudson.<sup>[23][25]</sup> He operated a tannery and employed [Jesse Grant](#), father of President [Ulysses S. Grant](#). Jesse lived with the Brown family for some years.<sup>[25]</sup> The founder of Hudson, [David Hudson](#), with whom John's father had frequent contact, was an abolitionist and an advocate of "forcible resistance by the slaves."<sup>[26]</sup>

The fourth child of Owen and Ruth,<sup>[22][b]</sup> Brown's older siblings were Anna Ruth (born in 1798), Salmon (born 1802), and Oliver Owen (born in 1804).<sup>[27][28]</sup> Frederick, identified by Owen as his sixth son, was born in 1807.<sup>[29]</sup> Frederick visited Brown when he was in jail, awaiting execution.<sup>[30]</sup> He had an adopted brother, Levi Blakeslee (born some time before 1805).<sup>[31]</sup> Salmon became a lawyer, politician, and newspaper editor.<sup>[29]</sup>

While Brown was very young, his father moved the family briefly to his hometown, [West Simsbury, Connecticut](#).<sup>[23]</sup> In 1805, the family moved, again, to [Hudson, Ohio](#), in the [Western Reserve](#), which at the time was mostly wilderness;<sup>[32]</sup> it became the most anti-slavery region of the country.<sup>[33]</sup> Owen hated slavery<sup>[34]</sup> and participated in Hudson's anti-slavery activity and debate, offering a [safe house](#) to [Underground Railroad fugitives](#).<sup>[35]</sup> Owen became a supporter of [Oberlin College](#) after [Western Reserve College](#) would not allow a Black man to enroll in the school.<sup>[36]</sup> Owen was an Oberlin trustee from 1835 to 1844.<sup>[36]</sup> Other Brown family members were abolitionists, but John and his eccentric brother Oliver were the most active and forceful.<sup>[37]</sup>

John's mother Ruth died a few hours after the death of her newborn girl in December 1808.<sup>[38]</sup> In his memoir, Brown wrote that he mourned his mother for years.<sup>[39][40]</sup> While he respected his father's new wife,<sup>[39][40]</sup> Sallie Root,<sup>[29]</sup> he never felt an emotional bond with her.<sup>[39][40]</sup> Owen married a third time to Lucy Hinsdale, a formerly married woman.<sup>[29]</sup> Owen had a total of 6 daughters and 10 sons.<sup>[29]</sup>

With no school beyond the elementary level in Hudson at that time, Brown studied at the school of the [abolitionist](#) Elizur Wright, father of the famous [Elizur Wright](#), in nearby [Tallmadge](#).<sup>[41]</sup> In a story he told to his family, when he was 12 years old and away from home moving cattle, Brown worked for a man with a colored boy, who was beaten before him with an iron shovel. He asked the man why he was treated thus, and the answer was that he was a slave. According to Brown's son-in-law Henry Thompson, it was that moment when John Brown decided to dedicate his life to improving African

Americans' condition.<sup>[42][43]</sup> As a child in Hudson, John got to know local Native Americans and learned some of their language.<sup>[22]</sup> He accompanied them on hunting excursions and invited them to eat in his home.<sup>[44][45]</sup>

## Young adulthood

At 16, Brown left his family for New England to acquire a liberal education and become a Gospel minister.<sup>[46]</sup> He consulted and conferred with Jeremiah Hallock, then clergyman at [Canton, Connecticut](#), whose wife was a relative of Brown's, and as advised proceeded to [Plainfield, Massachusetts](#), where, under the instruction of Moses Hallock, he prepared for college. He would have continued at [Amherst College](#),<sup>[41][47]</sup> but he suffered from inflammation of the eyes which ultimately became chronic and precluded further studies. He returned to Ohio.<sup>[23]</sup>

Back in Hudson, Brown taught himself surveying from a book.<sup>[48][c]</sup> He worked briefly at his father's tannery before opening a successful tannery outside of town with his adopted brother Levi Blakeslee.<sup>[41]</sup> The two kept bachelor's quarters, and Brown was a good cook.<sup>[41]</sup> He had his bread baked by a widow, Mrs. Amos Lusk. As the tanning business had grown to include journeymen and apprentices, Brown persuaded her to take charge of his housekeeping. She and her daughter Dianthe moved into his log cabin. Brown married Dianthe in 1820.<sup>[49]</sup> There is no known picture of her,<sup>[50]</sup> but he described Dianthe as "a remarkably plain, but neat, industrious and economical girl, of excellent character, earnest piety, and practical common sense".<sup>[51]</sup> Their first child, [John Jr.](#), was born 13 months later. During 12 years of married life Dianthe gave birth to seven children, among them [Owen](#), and died from complications of childbirth in 1832.<sup>[52]</sup>

Brown knew the Bible thoroughly and could catch even small errors in Bible recitation. He never used tobacco nor drank tea, coffee, or alcohol. After the Bible, his favorite books were the series of [Plutarch's Parallel Lives](#) and he enjoyed reading about [Napoleon](#) and [Oliver Cromwell](#).<sup>[53]</sup> He felt that "truly successful men" were those with their own libraries.<sup>[54]</sup>

## Pennsylvania

See also: [John Brown Farm, Tannery & Museum](#)



[John Brown's Tannery](#), in 1885

Brown left [Hudson, Ohio](#), where he had a successful tannery, to be better situated to operate a safe and productive [Underground Railroad](#) station.<sup>[55][56]</sup> He moved to [Richmond Township](#) in [Crawford County, Pennsylvania](#), in 1825<sup>[55][56][d]</sup> and lived there until 1835,<sup>[57]</sup> longer than he did anywhere else.<sup>[58]</sup> He bought 200 acres (81 hectares) of land, cleared an eighth of it, and quickly built a cabin, a two-story tannery with 18 vats, and a barn; in the latter was a secret, well-ventilated room to hide escaping slaves.<sup>[55][56]</sup> He transported refugees across the state border into New York and to an important Underground Railroad connection in [Jamestown](#),<sup>[57]</sup> about 55 miles (89 km) from Richmond Township.<sup>[59]</sup> The escapees were hidden in the wagon he used to move the mail, hides for his tannery, and survey equipment.<sup>[57]</sup> For ten years, his farm was an important stop on the Underground Railroad,<sup>[60]</sup> during which, it is estimated to have helped 2,500 enslaved people on their journey to Canada, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development.<sup>[60]</sup> Brown recruited other Underground Railroad stationmasters to strengthen the network.<sup>[57]</sup>



Brown made money surveying new roads. He was involved in erecting a school, which first met in his home—he was the first teacher<sup>[61]</sup>—, and attracting a preacher<sup>[62][63]</sup> for a [Congregational Society](#) in Richmond. Their first meetings were held at the farm and tannery compound.<sup>[64]</sup> He also helped to establish a post office, and in 1828 President [John Quincy Adams](#) named him the first [postmaster](#) of [Randolph Township, Pennsylvania](#); he was reappointed by President [Andrew Jackson](#), serving until he left Pennsylvania in 1835.<sup>[62][65]</sup> He carried the mail for some years from [Meadville, Pennsylvania](#), through Randolph to [Riceville](#), some 20 miles (32 km).<sup>[66]</sup> He paid a fine at Meadville for declining to serve in the militia. During this period, Brown operated an interstate cattle and leather business along with a kinsman, Seth Thompson, from eastern Ohio.<sup>[66]</sup> In 1829, some white families asked Brown to help them drive off Native Americans who hunted annually in the area. Calling it a mean act, Brown declined, even saying "I would sooner take my gun and help drive you out of the country."<sup>[67][68]</sup>



Mary Ann Brown (née Day), wife of John Brown, married in 1833, with Annie (left) and Sarah (right) in 1851

In 1831, Brown's son Frederick (I) died, at the age of 4. Brown fell ill, and his businesses began to suffer, leaving him in severe debt. In mid-1832, shortly after the death of a newborn son, his wife Dianthe also died, either in childbirth or as an immediate consequence of it.<sup>[69]</sup> He was left with the children [John Jr.](#), Jason, [Owen](#), Ruth and Frederick (II).<sup>[70][e]</sup> On July 14, 1833, Brown married 17-year-old [Mary Ann Day](#) (1817–1884), originally from [Washington County, New York](#);<sup>[72]</sup> she was the younger sister of Brown's housekeeper at the time.<sup>[73]</sup> They eventually had 13 children,<sup>[74][75]</sup> seven of whom were sons who worked with their father in the fight to abolish slavery.<sup>[76]</sup>

## Back to Ohio

In 1836, Brown moved his family from Pennsylvania to Franklin Mills, Ohio, where he taught [Sunday school](#).<sup>[77]</sup> He borrowed heavily to buy land in the area, including property along canals being built, and constructed and operated a tannery along the [Cuyahoga River](#) in partnership with Zenas Kent.<sup>[78]</sup> Zenas was the father of [Marvin Kent](#); Franklin Mills now is known as [Kent, Ohio](#), in Marvin's honor.<sup>[79]</sup> Brown continued to work on the Underground Railroad.<sup>[57]</sup>

Brown became a bank director and was estimated to be worth US\$20,000 (equivalent to about \$567,355 in 2022).<sup>[80]</sup> Like many businessmen in Ohio, he invested too heavily in credit and state bonds and suffered great financial losses in the [Panic of 1837](#). In one episode of property loss, Brown was jailed when he attempted to retain ownership of a farm by occupying it against the claims of the new owner.<sup>[81]</sup>



Wood engraving of the pro-slavery mob setting fire to [Gilman & Godfrey](#)'s warehouse, where [Elijah Parish Lovejoy](#) hid his printing press

In November 1837, [Elijah Parish Lovejoy](#) was murdered in [Alton, Illinois](#) for printing an abolitionist newspaper. Brown, deeply upset about the incident, became more militant in his behavior, comparable with Reverend [Henry Highland Garnet](#).<sup>[57]</sup> Brown publicly vowed after the incident: "Here, before God, in the presence of these witnesses, from this time, I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery!"<sup>[82]</sup> Brown objected to Black congregants being relegated to the balcony at his church<sup>[57]</sup> in Franklin Mills. According to daughter Ruth Brown's husband Henry Thompson, whose brother was killed at Harpers Ferry:

[H]e and his three sons, John, Jason, and Owen, were expelled from the Congregational church at Kent, then called Franklin, Ohio, for taking a colored man into their own pew; and the deacons of the church tried to persuade him to concede his error. My wife and various members of the family afterward joined the Wesley Methodists, but John Brown never connected himself with any church again.<sup>[42]</sup>

For three or four years he seemed to flounder hopelessly, moving from one activity to another without plan. He tried many different business efforts attempting to get out of debt. He bred horses briefly, but gave it up when he learned that buyers were using them as race horses.<sup>[83]</sup> He did some surveying, farming, and [tanning](#).<sup>[84]</sup> Brown declared [bankruptcy](#) in federal court on September 28, 1842.<sup>[43]</sup> In 1843, three of his children — Charles, Peter, Austin — died of [dysentery](#).<sup>[70]</sup>

From the mid-1840s, Brown had built a reputation as an expert in fine sheep and wool. For about one year, he ran Captain Oviatt's farm,<sup>[83]</sup> and he then entered into a partnership with Colonel Simon Perkins of [Akron, Ohio](#), whose flocks and farms were managed by Brown and his sons.<sup>[85][f]</sup> Brown eventually moved into a home with his family across the street from the [Perkins Stone Mansion](#).<sup>[86]</sup>

## Springfield, Massachusetts



A [daguerreotype](#) of Brown taken by African-American photographer [Augustus Washington](#) in [Springfield, Massachusetts](#), c. 1846–1847. Brown is holding the hand-colored flag of *Subterranean Pass Way*, his militant counterpart to the Underground Railroad.<sup>[87]</sup>



In 1846, Brown moved to [Springfield, Massachusetts](#), as an agent for Ohio [wool](#) growers in their relations with New England manufacturers of woolen goods, but "also as a means of developing his scheme of emancipation".<sup>[88]</sup> The white leadership there, including "the publisher of [The Republican](#), one of the nation's most influential newspapers, were deeply involved and emotionally invested in the [anti-slavery movement](#)".<sup>[89]</sup>

Brown made connections in Springfield that later yielded financial support he received from New England's great merchants, allowed him to hear and meet nationally famous abolitionists like Douglass and [Sojourner Truth](#), and included the foundation of the [League of Gileadites](#).<sup>[88][89]</sup> Brown's personal attitudes evolved in Springfield, as he observed the success of the city's Underground Railroad and made his first venture into militant, anti-slavery community organizing. In speeches, he pointed to the martyrs [Elijah Lovejoy](#) and [Charles Turner Torrey](#) as white people "ready to help blacks challenge slave-catchers".<sup>[90]</sup> In Springfield, Brown found a city that shared his own anti-slavery passions, and each seemed to educate the other. Certainly, with both successes and failures, Brown's Springfield years were a transformative period of his life that catalyzed many of his later actions.<sup>[89]</sup>

Two years before Brown's arrival in Springfield, in 1844, the city's African-American abolitionists had founded the Sanford Street Free Church, now known as [St. John's Congregational Church](#), which became one of the most prominent abolitionist platforms in the United States. From 1846 until he left Springfield in 1850, Brown was a member of the Free Church, where he witnessed abolitionist lectures by the likes of [Frederick Douglass](#) and [Sojourner Truth](#).<sup>[91]</sup> In 1847, after speaking at the Free Church, Douglass spent a night speaking with Brown, after which Douglass wrote, "From this night spent with John Brown in Springfield, Mass. [in] 1847, while I continued to write and speak against slavery, I became all the same less hopeful for its peaceful abolition."<sup>[89]</sup>

During Brown's time in Springfield, he became deeply involved in transforming the city into a major center of abolitionism, and one of the safest and most significant stops on the Underground Railroad.<sup>[92]</sup> Brown contributed to the 1848 republication, by his friend [Henry Highland Garnet](#), of [David Walker's](#) [An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World](#) (1829),<sup>[93]</sup> which he helped publicize.<sup>[94]</sup>

Before Brown left Springfield in 1850, the United States passed the [Fugitive Slave Act](#), a law mandating that authorities in free states aid in the return of escaped slaves and imposing penalties on those who aid in their escape. In response, Brown founded a militant group to prevent the recapture of fugitives, the [League of Gileadites](#),<sup>[93][9]</sup> operated by free Blacks—like the "strong-minded, brave, and dedicated" Eli Baptist, William Montague, and Thomas Thomas<sup>[89][11]</sup>—who risked being caught by slave catchers and sold into slavery.<sup>[57]</sup> Upon leaving Springfield in 1850, he instructed the League to act "quickly, quietly, and efficiently" to protect slaves that escaped to Springfield – words that would foreshadow Brown's later actions preceding Harpers Ferry.<sup>[95]</sup> From Brown's founding of the *League of Gileadites* onward, not one person was ever taken back into slavery from Springfield.<sup>[89]</sup>

His daughter Amelia died in 1846, followed by Emma in 1849.<sup>[85]</sup>

## New York

Main article: [John Brown Farm State Historic Site](#)





[John Brown's farmhouse](#), [North Elba, New York](#), now a historic site and [National Historic Landmark](#)

In 1848, bankrupt and having lost the family's house, Brown heard of [Gerrit Smith's Adirondack](#) land grants to poor black men, in so remote a location that Brown later called it [Timbuctoo](#), and decided to move his family there to establish a farm where he could provide guidance and assistance to the blacks who were attempting to establish farms in the area.<sup>[96]</sup> He bought from Smith land in the town of [North Elba, New York](#) (near [Lake Placid](#)), for \$1 an acre (\$2/ha).<sup>[97]</sup> It has a magnificent view<sup>[14]</sup> and has been called "the highest arable spot of land in the State."<sup>[98]</sup> After living with his family about two years in a small rented house, and returning for several years to Ohio, he had the current house – now a monument preserved by New York State – built for his family, viewing it as a place of refuge for them while he was away. According to youngest son Salmon, "frugality was observed from a moral standpoint, but one and all we were a well-fed, well-clad lot."<sup>[99]</sup>

After he was executed on December 2, 1859, his widow took [his body there for burial](#); the trip took five days, and he was buried on December 8. Watson's body was located and buried there in 1882. In 1899 the remains of 12 of Brown's other collaborators, including his son Oliver, were located and brought to North Elba. They could not be identified well enough for separate burials, so they are buried together in a single casket donated by the town of North Elba; there is a collective plaque there now. Since 1895, the [John Brown Farm State Historic Site](#) has been owned by New York State and is now a [National Historic Landmark](#).<sup>[96]</sup>

## Actions in Kansas

[Kansas Territory](#) was in the midst of a state-level civil war from 1854 to 1860, referred to as the [Bleeding Kansas](#) period, between pro- and anti-slavery forces.<sup>[100]</sup> From 1854 to 1856, there had been eight killings in Kansas Territory attributable to slavery politics. There had been no organized action by abolitionists against pro-slavery forces by 1856.<sup>[101]</sup> The issue was to be decided by the voters of Kansas, but who these voters were was not clear; there was widespread voting fraud in favor of the pro-slavery forces, as a Congressional investigation confirmed.<sup>[100]</sup>

### Move to Kansas

Five of Brown's sons — John Jr., Jason, Owen, Frederick, and Salmon — moved to [Kansas Territory](#) in the spring of 1855. Brown, his son Oliver, and his son-in-law Henry Thompson followed later that year<sup>[102]</sup> with a wagon loaded with weapons and ammunition.<sup>[103][1]</sup> Brown stayed with Florella (Brown) Adair and the Reverend Samuel Adair, his half-sister and her husband, who lived near [Osawatimie](#). During that time, he rallied support to fight proslavery forces,<sup>[102]</sup> and became the leader of the antislavery forces in Kansas.<sup>[103][105]</sup>

### Pottawatomie

*Main articles:* [Pottawatomie massacre](#) and [Bleeding Kansas](#)



John Brown, quarter-plate daguerreotype, attributed to [Southworth & Hawes](#), Winter 1856, [Massachusetts Historical Society](#)

Brown and the free-state settlers intended to bring Kansas into the union as a slavery-free state.<sup>[106]</sup> After the winter snows thawed in 1856, the pro-slavery activists began a campaign to seize Kansas on their own terms. Brown was particularly affected by the [sacking of Lawrence](#), the center of anti-slavery activity in Kansas, on May 21, 1856. A [sheriff](#)-led posse from Leecompton, the center of pro-slavery activity in Kansas, destroyed two [abolitionist](#) newspapers and the [Free State Hotel](#). Only one man, a [border ruffian](#), was killed.<sup>[107]</sup>

[Preston Brooks](#)'s May 22 [caning](#) of anti-slavery Senator [Charles Sumner](#) in the [United States Senate](#), news of which arrived by newswire (telegraph), also fueled Brown's anger. A pro-slavery writer, [Benjamin Franklin Stringfellow](#), of the *Squatter Sovereign*, wrote that "[pro-slavery forces] are determined to repel this Northern invasion, and make Kansas a [slave state](#); though our rivers should be covered with the blood of their victims, and the carcasses of the abolitionists should be so numerous in the territory as to breed disease and sickness, we will not be deterred from our purpose".<sup>[107]</sup> Brown was outraged by both the violence of the pro-slavery forces and what he saw as a weak and cowardly response by the antislavery partisans and the Free State settlers, whom he described as "cowards, or worse".<sup>[108]</sup>

The [Pottawatomie massacre](#) occurred during the night of May 24 and the morning of May 25, 1856. Under Brown's supervision, his sons and other abolitionist settlers took from their residences and killed five "professional slave hunters and militant pro-slavery" settlers.<sup>[109]</sup> The massacre was the match in the powderkeg that precipitated the bloodiest period in "Bleeding Kansas" history, a three-month period of retaliatory raids and battles in which 29 people died.<sup>[101]</sup>

[Henry Clay Pate](#), who was part of the sacking of Lawrence was, either during or shortly before, commissioned as a Deputy United States Marshal.<sup>[110]</sup> On hearing news of John Brown's actions at the [Pottawatomie Massacre](#), Pate set out with a band of thirty men to hunt Brown down.<sup>[111]</sup> During the hunt for Brown, two of his sons (Jason and [John Junior](#)) were captured (either by Pate or another marshal), charged with murder, and thrown in irons.<sup>[110][111]</sup> Brown and free-state militia gathered to confront Pate. Two of Pate's men were captured, which led to the conflict on June 2.<sup>[112]</sup>

## Palmyra and Osawatomie

In the [Battle of Black Jack](#) of June 2, 1856, John Brown, nine of his followers, and 20 local men successfully defended a Free State settlement at [Palmyra, Kansas](#), against an attack by [Henry Clay Pate](#). Pate and 22 of his men were taken prisoner.<sup>[113]</sup>



In August, a company of over 300 Missourians under the command of General [John W. Reid](#) crossed into Kansas and headed towards [Osawatomie](#), intending to destroy the Free State settlements there, and then march on [Topeka](#) and [Lawrence](#).<sup>[114]</sup> On the morning of August 30, 1856, they shot and killed Brown's son Frederick and his neighbor David Garrison on the outskirts of Osawatomie. Brown, outnumbered more than seven to one, arranged his 38 men behind natural defenses along the road. Firing from cover, they managed to kill at least 20 of Reid's men and wounded 40 more.<sup>[115]</sup> Reid regrouped, ordering his men to dismount and charge into the woods. Brown's small group scattered and fled across the [Marais des Cygnes River](#). One of Brown's men was killed during the retreat and four were captured. While Brown and his surviving men hid in the woods nearby, the Missourians plundered and burned Osawatomie. Though defeated, Brown's bravery and military shrewdness in the face of overwhelming odds brought him national attention and made him a hero to many Northern abolitionists.<sup>[116]</sup>

On September 7, Brown entered Lawrence to meet with Free State leaders and help fortify against a feared assault. At least 2,700 pro-slavery Missourians were once again invading Kansas. On September 14, they skirmished near Lawrence. Brown prepared for battle, but serious violence was averted when the new governor of Kansas, [John W. Geary](#), ordered the warring parties to disarm and disband, and offered clemency to former fighters on both sides.<sup>[117]</sup>

Brown had become infamous and federal warrants were issued for his arrest due to his actions in Kansas. He became careful of how he travelled and whom he stayed with across the country.<sup>[118]</sup>

## Raid at Harpers Ferry

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Main article: [John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry](#)

See also: [List of sources for John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry](#)

### Brown's plans



Three-quarter length portrait of John Brown, salt print, reproduction of daguerreotype attributed to [Martin M. Lawrence](#), May 1859

Brown's plans for a major attack on American slavery began long before the raid. According to his wife Mary, interviewed while her husband was awaiting his execution, Brown had been planning the attack for 20 years.<sup>[119]</sup> Frederick Douglass noted that he made the plans before he fought in Kansas.<sup>[120]</sup> For instance, he spent the years between 1842 and 1849 settling his business affairs, moving his family to the Negro community at [Timbuctoo, New York](#), and organizing in his own mind an anti-slavery raid that would strike a significant blow against the entire slave system, running slaves off Southern plantations.<sup>[121]</sup>

According to his first biographer [James Redpath](#), "for thirty years, he secretly cherished the idea of being the leader of a servile insurrection: the American Moses, predestined by Omnipotence to lead

the servile nations in our Southern States to freedom."<sup>[122]</sup> An acquaintance said: "As Moses was raised up and chosen of God to deliver the Children of Israel out of Egyptian bondage, ...he was...fully convinced in his own mind that he was to be the instrument in the hands of God to effect the emancipation of the slaves."<sup>[123]</sup>

Brown said that,

A few men in the right, and knowing that they are right, can overturn a mighty king. Fifty men, twenty men, in the Alleghenies would break slavery to pieces in two years.<sup>[124]</sup>

On December 2, 1859, in Charles Town, after failure of the raid and the date of his execution, I John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this *guilty land*; will never be purged away; but with *Blood*. I had, *as I now think*, vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed [through the revolt supposed to start with Harpers Ferry] it [ending slavery] might be done."<sup>[125]</sup> (emphasis by Brown)

Brown kept his plans a secret, including the care he took not to share the plans with his men, according to Jeremiah Anderson, one of the participants in the raid.<sup>[126]</sup> His son [Owen](#), the only one who survived of Brown's three participating sons, said in 1873 that he did not think his father wrote down the entire plan.<sup>[127]</sup> He did discuss his plans at length, for over a day, with Frederick Douglass, trying unsuccessfully to persuade Douglass, a black leader, to accompany him to Harpers Ferry (which Douglass thought a suicidal mission that could not succeed).<sup>[128]</sup>

## Preparations

### Financial and political backing

To attain financial backing and political support for the raid on Harpers Ferry, Brown spent most of 1857 meeting with abolitionists in Massachusetts, New York, and Connecticut.<sup>[129]</sup> Initially Brown returned to Springfield, where he received contributions, and also a letter of recommendation from a prominent and wealthy merchant, George Walker. Walker was the brother-in-law of [Franklin Benjamin Sanborn](#), the secretary for the [Massachusetts State Kansas Committee](#), who introduced Brown to several influential abolitionists in the Boston area in January 1857.<sup>[88][130]</sup> [Amos Adams Lawrence](#), a prominent Boston merchant, secretly gave Brown a large amount of cash.<sup>[131]</sup> [William Lloyd Garrison](#), [Thomas Wentworth Higginson](#), [Theodore Parker](#) and [George Luther Stearns](#), and [Samuel Gridley Howe](#) also supported Brown,<sup>[131]</sup> although Garrison, a pacifist, disagreed about the need to use violence to end slavery.<sup>[132]</sup>

Most of the money for the raid came from the "[Secret Six](#)",<sup>[129][133]</sup> [Franklin B. Sanborn](#), [Samuel G. Howe](#) M.D., businessman [George L. Stearns](#), real estate tycoon [Gerrit Smith](#), transcendentalist and reforming minister of the [Unitarian](#) church [Theodore Parker](#), and Unitarian minister [Thomas Wentworth Higginson](#).<sup>[129]</sup> Recent research has also highlighted the substantial contribution of [Mary Ellen Pleasant](#), an African American entrepreneur and abolitionist, who donated \$30,000 (equivalent to \$942,214 in 2022) toward the cause.<sup>[134]</sup>

In Boston, he met [Henry David Thoreau](#) and [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#).<sup>[132]</sup> Even with the Secret Six and other contributors, Brown had not collected all money needed to fund the raid. He wrote an appeal, *Old Browns Farewell*, to abolitionists in the east with some success.<sup>[132]</sup>

In December 1857, an anti-slavery Mock Legislature, organized by Brown, met in [Springdale, Iowa](#).<sup>[135]</sup> On several of Brown's trips across Iowa he preached at [Hitchcock House](#), an Underground Railroad stop in [Lewis, Iowa](#).<sup>[136]</sup>

### "Virginia scheme"





William Maxon's house, near [Springdale, Iowa](#), where John Brown's associates lived and trained, 1857–1859. Brown lived at the home of [John Hunt Painter](#), less than a mile away.

With a free-state victory in the October elections, Kansas was quiet. Brown made his men return to Iowa, where he told them tidbits of his Virginia scheme.<sup>[137]</sup> In January 1858, Brown left his men in [Springdale, Iowa](#), and set off to visit [Frederick Douglass](#) in [Rochester, New York](#). There he discussed his plans with Douglass, and reconsidered Forbes' criticisms.<sup>[138]</sup> Brown wrote a [Provisional Constitution](#) that would create a government for a new state in the region of his invasion. He then traveled to [Peterboro, New York](#), and Boston to discuss matters with the Secret Six. In letters to them, he indicated that, along with recruits, he would go into the South equipped with weapons to do "Kansas work".<sup>[139]</sup> While in Boston making secret preparations for his operation on Harper's Ferry, he was raising money for weapons that were manufactured in Connecticut. Abolitionist Chaplain [Photius Fisk](#) gave him a sizable donation and obtained his autograph which he later gave to the [Kansas Historical Society](#).<sup>[140]</sup>

Brown started to wear a beard, "to change his usual appearance".<sup>[141]</sup>

### Weapons

The Massachusetts Committee pledged to provide 200 [Sharps Rifles](#) and ammunition, which were being stored at [Tabor, Iowa](#). The rifles were originally intended for use by free-staters in Kansas. After negotiation between the officers of the Massachusetts Kansas Committee and the National Committee, the rifles were transferred to the Massachusetts Committee for use in the Harpers Ferry raid.<sup>[142]</sup> Horatio N. Rust, a friend of Brown's, helped acquire for 1,000 [pikes](#) for the intended slave rebellion.<sup>[143]</sup>

Weapons were purchased and sent to [Kennedy Farmhouse](#) in [Sharpsburg, Maryland](#), where they were stored.<sup>[144]</sup> Brown's plan was to make use of weapons, ammunition, and other military equipment stored at the armory, arsenal, and the rifle factory in Harpers Ferry.<sup>[145]</sup> There were an estimated 100,000 muskets and rifles at the armory and arsenal complex at the time.<sup>[146]</sup>

The more sophisticated weapons, like Sharps rifles and pistols, were to be used by Black and White officers. The remaining fighters would use spear-like pikes, [shotguns](#), and [muskets](#).<sup>[147]</sup>

### Constitutional convention in Ontario

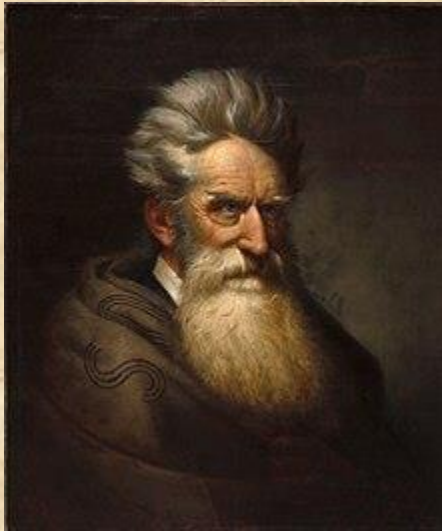
Brown and 12 of his followers, including his son [Owen](#), traveled to [Chatham](#), Ontario, where he convened on May 10 a [Constitutional Convention](#).<sup>[148]</sup> The convention, with several dozen delegates including his friend [James Madison Bell](#), was put together with the help of Dr. [Martin Delany](#).<sup>[149]</sup> One-third of Chatham's 6,000 residents were fugitive slaves, and it was here that Brown was introduced to [Harriet Tubman](#), who helped him recruit.<sup>[150]</sup> The convention's 34 blacks and 12 whites adopted Brown's [Provisional Constitution](#). Brown had long used the terminology of the Subterranean Pass Way from the late 1840s, so it is possible that Delany conflated Brown's statements over the years. Regardless, Brown was elected commander-in-chief and named [John Henrie Kagi](#) his "Secretary of War". [Richard Realf](#) was named "Secretary of State". Elder Monroe, a black minister, was to act as president until another was chosen. A. M. Chapman was the acting vice president; Delany, the corresponding secretary. In 1859, "A Declaration of Liberty by the Representatives of the Slave Population of the United States of America" was written.<sup>[151][152]</sup>

## Crisis

While in New York City, Brown was introduced to Hugh Forbes, an English mercenary, who had experience as a military tactician fighting with [Giuseppe Garibaldi](#). Concerned about Brown's strategy, Forbes undermined and delayed the plans for the raid.<sup>[153]</sup>

Although nearly all of the delegates signed the constitution, few volunteered to join Brown's forces, although it will never be clear how many Canadian expatriates actually intended to join Brown because of a subsequent "security leak" that threw off plans for the raid, creating a hiatus in which Brown lost contact with many of the Canadian leaders. This crisis occurred when Hugh Forbes, Brown's mercenary, tried to expose the plans to Massachusetts Senator [Henry Wilson](#) and others. The Secret Six feared their names would be made public. Howe and Higginson wanted no delays in Brown's progress, while Parker, Stearns, Smith and Sanborn insisted on postponement. Stearns and Smith were the major sources of funds, and their words carried more weight. To throw Forbes off the trail and invalidate his assertions, Brown returned to Kansas in June, and remained in that vicinity for six months. There he joined forces with [James Montgomery](#), who was leading raids into Missouri.

## Continue to organize funds and forces



Portrait of John Brown, by [Ole Peter Hansen Balling](#), 1872, National Portrait Gallery

On December 20, Brown [led his own raid](#), in which he liberated 11 slaves, took captive two white men, and looted horses and wagons. The Governor of Missouri announced a reward of \$3,000 (equivalent to \$97,711 in 2022) for his capture. On January 20, 1859, he embarked on a lengthy journey to take the liberated slaves to Detroit and then on a ferry to Canada. While passing through Chicago, Brown met with abolitionists [Allan Pinkerton](#), [John Jones](#), and [Henry O. Wagoner](#) who arranged and raised the fare for the passage to Detroit<sup>[154]</sup> and purchased supplies for Brown. Jones's wife and fellow abolitionist, [Mary Jane Richardson Jones](#), provided new clothes for Brown and his men, including the garb Brown [was hanged in](#) six months later.<sup>[155][156]</sup> On March 12, 1859, Brown met with [Frederick Douglass](#) and Detroit abolitionists [George DeBaptiste](#), William Lambert, and others at William Webb's house in Detroit to discuss emancipation.<sup>[157]</sup> DeBaptiste proposed that conspirators blow up some of the South's largest churches. The suggestion was opposed by Brown, who felt humanity precluded such unnecessary bloodshed.<sup>[158]</sup>

Over the course of the next few months, he traveled again through Ohio, New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts to drum up more support for the cause. On May 9, he delivered a lecture in [Concord, Massachusetts](#), that [Amos Bronson Alcott](#), Emerson, and Thoreau attended. Brown reconnoitered with the Secret Six.<sup>[159]</sup>





[Leslie's](#) illustration of U.S. Marines attacking John Brown's

"Fort"

As he began recruiting supporters for an attack on slaveholders, Brown was joined by [Harriet Tubman](#), "General Tubman", as he called her.<sup>[160]</sup> Her knowledge of support networks and resources in the border states of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware was invaluable to Brown and his planners.<sup>[161]</sup> She also raised funds for Brown.<sup>[162]</sup>

Some abolitionists, including [Frederick Douglass](#) and [William Lloyd Garrison](#), opposed his tactics, but Brown dreamed of fighting to create a new state for freed slaves and made preparations for military action. After he began the first battle, he believed, slaves would rise up and carry out a rebellion across the South.<sup>[161]</sup>

## Brown's forces

*Main article:* [John Brown's raiders](#)

The men that fought with Brown in Kansas gathered at [Springdale, Iowa](#), a Quaker settlement, about January 1858, to prepare to execute Brown's Virginia scheme.<sup>[163]</sup>

In June, Brown paid his last visit to his family in North Elba before departing for Harpers Ferry. He stayed one night en route in [Hagerstown, Maryland](#), at the Washington House, on West Washington Street. On June 30, 1859, the hotel had at least 25 guests, including I. Smith and Sons, Oliver Smith and Owen Smith, and Jeremiah Anderson, all from New York. From papers found in the Kennedy Farmhouse after the raid, it is known that Brown wrote to Kagi that he would sign into a hotel as I. Smith and Sons.<sup>[159]</sup>

The men who prepared for the raid at Kennedy Farmhouse and participated in the raid with Brown included two groups of men:

A group that fought with him in Kansas and gathered at Springdale, Iowa, to prepare and drill for the raid,<sup>[164]</sup>

- [Jeremiah Goldsmith Anderson](#), 26, born in Indiana, served with Brown in Kansas, killed in the raid.<sup>[165]</sup>
- [Oliver Brown](#), 20, John Brown's son, served in Kansas, and he was mortally wounded during the raid<sup>[166]</sup>
- [Owen Brown](#), about 35, John Brown's son, fought in Kansas. He escaped the raid.<sup>[167]</sup>
- [John E. Cook](#), 29, reformer and former soldier, attended [Oberlin College](#), he initially escaped capture, but was found and hanged<sup>[167]</sup>
- [Albert Hazlett](#), 23, fought in Kansas, escaped following the raid, but was captured and hanged<sup>[168]</sup>
- [John Henry Kagi](#), about 24, a teacher, became Brown's second in command, before the raid he printed copies of Brown's constitution in a printing shop he established in [Hamilton, Ontario](#), mortally wounded during the raid<sup>[169]</sup>
- William H. Leeman, 20, fought with the free-staters in Kansas for three years, beginning at the age of 17. He died during the raid.<sup>[170]</sup>

- [Aaron Dwight Stevens](#), about 28, was a former soldier and fighter in Kansas, who gave the men military training and drills. He was wounded during the raid, after which he was executed.<sup>[171]</sup>
- Charles Plummer Tidd, 25, fought in Kansas. He escaped the raid and later served during the Civil War.<sup>[171]</sup>

Men he met when rounding up recruits for the raid:<sup>[164]</sup>

- [Watson Brown](#), son of John Brown, mortally wounded during the raid<sup>[172]</sup>
- [John Anthony Copeland Jr.](#) was a free black man who joined John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. He was captured during the raid and was executed<sup>[173]</sup>
- [Barclay Coppoc](#), 19, escaped capture following the raid. He fought in the Civil War.<sup>[174]</sup>
- [Edwin Coppoc](#), 24, captured and hanged.<sup>[175]</sup>
- [Shields Green](#), about 23, escaped slavery, captured and hanged.<sup>[168]</sup>
- [Lewis Sheridan Leary](#), a harness maker freed by his white father, mortally wounded during the raid<sup>[176]</sup>
- [Francis Jackson Meriam](#), 22, grandson of [Francis Jackson](#) who was a leader of Antislavery Societies. Meriam was an aristocrat. He escaped during the raid. Captain Meriam led an African American infantry group during the Civil War.<sup>[168]</sup>
- [Dangerfield Newby](#), 44, born a slave, escaped slavery, returned to Virginia to fight in the raid, where he was killed.<sup>[177]</sup>
- Stewart Taylor, 23, a wagonmaker from Canada, mortally wounded during the raid.<sup>[178]</sup>
- Dauphin Thompson, 21, married to Ruth Brown, John Brown's daughter, mortally wounded during the raid<sup>[178]</sup>
- William Thompson, 26, mortally wounded during the raid<sup>[178]</sup>



[Kennedy Farmhouse](#), depicting Brown in his favorite spot in the yard, made posthumously in 1902

They were at [Kennedy Farmhouse](#), four to five miles away from Harpers Ferry. Brown's daughter and daughter-in-law, Anne and Martha, Oliver's wife, prepared food and kept the house for the men from August and throughout the month of September.<sup>[144]</sup>

## The raid

Main article: [John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry § Timeline of the raid](#)

Brown led his forces for Harper Ferry on the night of October 16, 1859.<sup>[179]</sup> The objective was to take the armory, the arsenal, the town, and then the rifle factory. Then, they wanted to free all the slaves in Harpers Ferry.<sup>[180]</sup> After that, they would move south with those newly freed people wanted to join the fight to free other enslaved people.<sup>[181]</sup> Brown told his men to take prisoners who disobeyed them and to fight only in self-defense.<sup>[182]</sup>



Initially, they met no resistance entering the town. [John Brown's raiders](#) cut the telegraph wires and easily captured the armory, which was being defended by a single watchman. They next rounded up hostages from nearby farms, including [Colonel Lewis Washington](#), great-grandnephew of [George Washington](#). They also spread the news to the local slaves that their liberation was at hand. Two of the hostages' slaves also died in the raid.<sup>[183]</sup>

When an eastbound [Baltimore and Ohio Railroad](#) train approached the town, Brown held it and then inexplicably allowed it to continue on its way. At the next station where the telegraph still worked, the conductor sent a telegram to B&O headquarters in [Baltimore](#). The railroad sent telegrams to President Buchanan and Virginia Governor [Henry A. Wise](#).<sup>[184]</sup>



Illustration of the interior of the Fort immediately before the door is broken down. Note hostages on the left.

By the morning of October 18 the engine house, later known as [John Brown's Fort](#), was surrounded by a company of [U.S. Marines](#) under the command of First Lieutenant [Israel Greene](#), USMC, with Colonel [Robert E. Lee](#) of the United States Army in overall command.<sup>[185]</sup>

Army First Lieutenant [J. E. B. Stuart](#) approached the engine-house to apprehend Brown and told the raiders their lives would be spared if they surrendered. Brown refused, saying, "No, I prefer to die here." Stuart then gave a signal and the Marines used sledgehammers and a makeshift battering ram to break down the engine room door. Lieutenant Israel Greene cornered Brown and struck him several times, wounding his head. In three minutes Brown and the survivors were captives.<sup>[186]</sup>

Altogether, Brown's men killed four townspeople and one Marine. Ten people were wounded, one of whom was a Marine.<sup>[187]</sup> Four of Brown's men were not captured, the rest died during the raid or were captured and executed.<sup>[164]</sup> Among the raiders killed were [John Henry Kagi](#), [Lewis Sheridan Leary](#), and [Dangerfield Newby](#); those hanged besides Brown included [John Copeland](#), [Edwin Coppock](#), [Aaron Stevens](#), and [Shields Green](#).<sup>[188][189]</sup> Most of the enslaved people were returned to their slaveholders, and some were able to escape capture. A man named Phil was captured with Brown, and a man named Jim drowned in the Shenandoah.<sup>[190]</sup>

Brown and the others captured were held in the office of the armory. On October 18, 1859, Virginia Governor [Henry A. Wise](#), Virginia Senator [James M. Mason](#), and Representative [Clement Vallandigham](#) of Ohio arrived in Harpers Ferry. Brown conceded that he did not receive the support he expected from White and Black people. The questioning lasted several hours.<sup>[191]</sup>

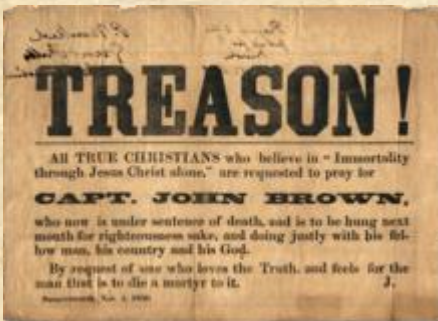
## The trial

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Main article: [Virginia v. John Brown](#)



Brown has just been captured and is interrogated by Virginia Gov. [Henry A. Wise](#) and others, October 18, 1859.



The old Court House at Charles Town, Jefferson County, Virginia, where John Brown was tried; it stands diagonally across the street from the jail (c. 1906).



Two houses in Charles Town. The one on the right was the Jefferson County Jail, where John Brown was imprisoned during and after his trial. It has been torn down and is now the site of the Charles Town post office.

Brown was charged with treason, and was tried in a Virginia state court at Governor Wise's request. Accordingly, the charge was treason against Virginia.<sup>[192]</sup> President Buchanan did not object.<sup>[193]</sup>

The answer provided in 1859 was more political ~ than legal. The president of the United States and the governor of Virginia decided that Brown would be tried in Virginia for treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia, and that is where he was tried. This decision thrust Virginia rather than the United States into the role of the offended sovereign and contributed incalculably to the widening abyss between North and South. John Brown was condemned



not as an enemy of the American people but as an enemy of Virginia and, by logical extension, of Southern slaveholders.

—*Brian McGinty, author of John Brown's trial*<sup>[194]</sup>

Brown was tried with his men who had lived through the raid and had not escaped — Copeland, Coppoc, Green, and Stevens — on charges of murder, "conspiracy to foment a slave insurrection", and treason, as of October 26.<sup>[195]</sup>

On November 2, after a week-long trial in Charles Town, the county seat of Jefferson County,<sup>[196][197]</sup> and 45 minutes of deliberation, the jury found Brown guilty on all three counts.<sup>[197]</sup> He was sentenced to be hanged in public on December 2.<sup>[197]</sup> He was the first person executed for treason in the history of the United States.<sup>[11][12]</sup>

The trial attracted reporters who were able to send their articles via the new [telegraph](#). They were reprinted in numerous papers. It was the first trial in the U.S. to be nationally reported.<sup>[198]</sup>

## November 2 to December 2, 1859

Before his conviction, reporters were not allowed access to Brown, as the judge and Andrew Hunter feared that his statements, if quickly published, would exacerbate tensions, especially among the enslaved. This was much to Brown's frustration, as he stated that he wanted to make a full statement of his motives and intentions through the press.<sup>[199]</sup> Once he had been convicted, the restriction was lifted, and, glad for the publicity, he talked with reporters and anyone else who wanted to see him, except pro-slavery clergy.<sup>[71]</sup> Brown received more letters than he ever had in his life. He wrote replies constantly, hundreds of eloquent letters, often published in newspapers.<sup>[200]</sup>

## Rescue and Victor Hugo's pardon plans

There were well-documented and specific plans to rescue Brown, as Virginia Governor [Henry A. Wise](#) wrote to [President Buchanan](#). Throughout the weeks Brown and six of his collaborators were in the Jefferson County Jail in Charles Town, the town was filled with various types of troops and militia, hundreds and sometimes thousands of them. Brown's trips from the jail to the courthouse and back, and especially the short trip from the jail to the gallows, were heavily guarded. Wise halted all non-military transportation on the [Winchester and Potomac Railroad](#) (from Maryland south through Harpers Ferry to Charles Town and Winchester), from the day before through the day after the execution. Jefferson County was under [martial law](#),<sup>[201]</sup> and the military orders in Charles Town for the execution day had 14 points.<sup>[202]</sup>

However, Brown said several times that he did not want to be rescued. He refused the assistance of [Silas Soule](#), a friend from Kansas who infiltrated the Jefferson County Jail one day by getting himself arrested for drunken brawling and offered to break him out during the night and flee northward to New York State and possibly Canada. Brown told Silas that, aged 59, he was too old to live a life on the run from the federal authorities as a fugitive and wanted to accept his execution as a martyr for the abolitionist cause. As Brown wrote his wife and children from jail, he believed that his "blood will do vastly more towards advancing the cause I have earnestly endeavoured to promote, than all I have done in my life before."<sup>[203]</sup> "I am worth inconceivably more to hang than for any other purpose."<sup>[204]</sup>

[Victor Hugo](#), from exile on [Guernsey](#), tried to obtain a [pardon](#) for John Brown: he sent an [open letter](#) that was published by the press on both sides of the Atlantic. This text, written at [Hauteville House](#) on December 2, 1859, warned of a possible civil war:

Politically speaking, the murder of John Brown would be an uncorrectable sin. It would create in the Union a latent fissure that would in the long run dislocate it. Brown's agony might perhaps consolidate slavery in Virginia, but it would certainly shake the whole

American democracy. You save your shame, but you kill your glory. Morally speaking, it seems a part of the human light would put itself out, that the very notion of justice and injustice would hide itself in darkness, on that day where one would see the assassination of Emancipation by Liberty itself.

The letter was initially published in the *London News*<sup>[[dubious](#) - [discuss](#)]</sup> and was widely reprinted. After Brown's execution, Hugo wrote a number of additional letters about Brown and the abolitionist cause.<sup>[[205](#)]</sup>

Abolitionists in the United States saw Hugo's writings as evidence of international support for the anti-slavery cause. The most widely publicized commentary on Brown to reach America from Europe was an 1861 pamphlet, *John Brown par Victor Hugo*, that included a brief biography and reprinted two letters by Hugo, including that of December 9, 1859. The pamphlet's frontispiece was an engraving of a hanged man by Hugo that became widely associated with the execution.<sup>[[206](#)]</sup>

## Last words, death and aftermath

On December 1, Mary Ann Brown, who had stayed away from the prison due to Brown's concern for her safety, visited her husband for several hours with permission from Governor Wise.<sup>[[207](#)]</sup>

On the day of his execution, December 2,<sup>[[208](#)]</sup> Brown read his Bible and wrote a final letter to his wife, which included the will he had written the previous day,<sup>[[209](#)][[207](#)][[210](#)]</sup> as [large meetings](#) were held in many cities in the Northeast. In many of the cases, "Negroes were the chief actors in creating excitement".<sup>[[208](#)]</sup>

*Charlestown, Va., 2<sup>d</sup> December, 1859.  
I John Brown am now quite certain that  
the crimes of this guilty land will never be  
purged away but with blood. I had, as I now  
think, vainly flattered myself that without very  
much bloodshed it might be done.*

JOHN BROWN'S LAST PROSELY

John Brown's last words, passed to a jailer on his way to the gallows. From an [albumen print](#); location of the original is unknown.

Brown was well read and knew that the last words of prominent people are valued. That morning, Brown wrote and gave to his jailer Avis the words he wanted to be remembered by: I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood. I had, as I now think, vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed it might be done.<sup>[[211](#)]</sup>



Brown sits on his coffin on his way to the gallows. Soldiers line up on both sides, to avoid a rescue.

At 11:00 a.m. Brown rode, sitting on his coffin in a furniture wagon, from the county jail through a crowd of 2,000 soldiers to a small field a few blocks away, where the gallows were.<sup>[[209](#)]</sup> The military, prepared for an attack, lined the square where Brown was to be hung, with "the greatest array of disciplined forces ever seen in Virginia", according to Major Preston.<sup>[[207](#)]</sup> Among the soldiers in the crowd were future Confederate general [Stonewall](#)



[Jackson](#), and [John Wilkes Booth](#) (the latter borrowing a militia uniform to gain admission to the execution).<sup>[209]</sup>

Brown, who did not want to have a minister with him, displayed "the most complete fearlessness of & insensibility to danger & death" as he walked to the gallows.<sup>[207]</sup> Brown was hanged at 11:15 a.m. and was pronounced dead 35 minutes later by the coroner.<sup>[212]</sup>

The poet [Walt Whitman](#), in *Year of Meteors*, described viewing the execution.<sup>[213]</sup>

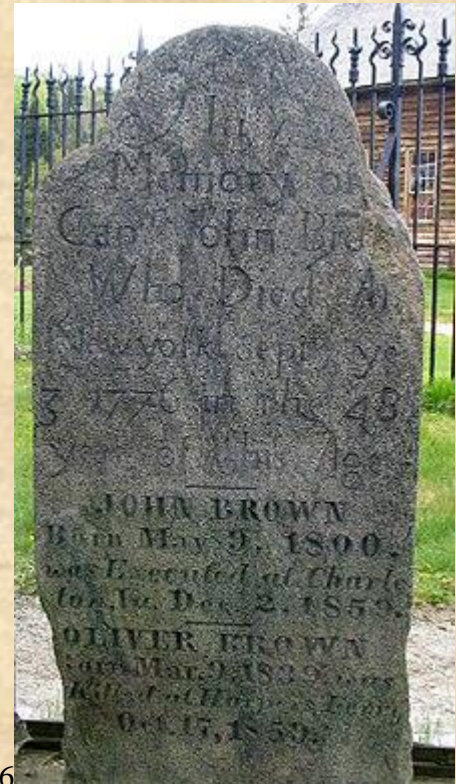
See also: [John Brown's last speech](#)

## Funeral and burial

Main article: [John Brown's body](#)



Brown's grave, 1896



Brown's tombstone, North Elba, New York

Brown's desire, as told to the jailor in Charles Town, was that his body be burned, "the ashes urned", and his dead sons disinterred and treated likewise.<sup>[214][215]</sup> He wanted his epitaph to be:

I have fought a good fight.

I have finished my course.

I have kept the faith. <sup>[2 Timothy 4:7]</sup><sup>[216]</sup>

However, according to the sheriff of Jefferson County, Virginia law did not allow the burning of bodies, and Mrs. Brown did not want it. Brown's body was placed in a wooden coffin with the noose still around his neck, and the coffin was then put on a train to take it away from Virginia to [his family homestead](#) in [North Elba, New York](#) for burial.<sup>[217]</sup>

His body needed to be prepared for burial; this was supposed to take place in Philadelphia. There were many Southern pro-slavery medical students and faculty in Philadelphia, and as a direct result, they left the city *en masse* on December 21, 1859,

for Southern medical schools, never to return. When Mary and her husband's body arrived on December 3, Philadelphia Mayor [Alexander Henry](#) met the train, with many policemen, and said public order could not be maintained if the casket remained in Philadelphia. In fact he "made a fake casket, covered with flowers and flags[,] which was carefully lifted from the coach"; the crowd followed the sham casket. The genuine casket was immediately sent onwards.<sup>[218][219]</sup> It was transported through places special to Brown during his life. His corpse was transported via [Troy, New York](#), [Rutland, Vermont](#), and across [Lake Champlain](#) by boat. His corpse arrived at the Brown farm at North Elba, New York.<sup>[220]</sup> Brown's body was washed, dressed, and placed, with difficulty, in a 5-foot-10-inch (1.78 m) walnut coffin, in New York.<sup>[221]</sup> He was buried on December 8, 1859.<sup>[222]</sup> Abolitionist Rev. [Joshua Young](#) gave a prayer, and [James Miller McKim](#) and [Wendell Phillips](#) spoke.<sup>[220][222]</sup>

In the North, large memorial meetings took place, church bells rang, minute guns were fired, and famous writers such as [Emerson](#) and [Thoreau](#) joined many Northerners in praising Brown.<sup>[223]</sup>

On July 4, 1860, family and admirers of Brown gathered [at his farm](#) for a memorial. This was the last time that the surviving members of Brown's family gathered together. The farm was sold, except for the burial plot. By 1882, [John Jr.](#), [Owen](#), Jason, and Ruth, widow of Henry Thompson, lived in Ohio; his wife and their two unmarried daughters in California.<sup>[224]</sup> By 1886, Owen, Jason, and Ruth were living near [Pasadena, California](#), where they were honored in a parade.<sup>[225]</sup>

## Senate investigation

On December 14, 1859, the [U.S. Senate](#) appointed a bipartisan committee to investigate the Harpers Ferry raid and to determine whether any citizens contributed arms, ammunition or money to John Brown's men. The Democrats attempted to implicate the Republicans in the raid; the Republicans tried to disassociate themselves from Brown and his acts.<sup>[226][227]</sup>

The Senate committee heard testimony from 32 witnesses, including Liam Dodson, one of the surviving abolitionists. The report, authored by chairman [James Murray Mason](#), a pro-slavery Democrat from Virginia, was published in June 1860. It found no direct evidence of a conspiracy, but implied that the raid was a result of Republican doctrines.<sup>[227]</sup> The two committee Republicans published a [minority report](#), but were apparently more concerned about denying Northern culpability than clarifying the nature of Brown's efforts. Republicans such as [Abraham Lincoln](#) rejected any connection with the raid, calling Brown "insane".<sup>[228]</sup>

The investigation was performed in a tense environment in both houses of Congress. One senator wrote to his wife that "The members on both sides are mostly armed with deadly weapons and it is said that the friends of each are armed in the galleries." After a heated exchange of insults, a Mississippian attacked [Thaddeus Stevens](#) of Pennsylvania with a [Bowie knife](#) in the House of Representatives. Stevens' friends prevented a fight.<sup>[229]</sup>

The Senate committee was very cautious in its questions of two of Brown's backers, [Samuel Howe](#) and [George Stearns](#), out of fear of stoking violence. Howe and Stearns later said that the questions were asked in a manner that permitted them to give honest answers without implicating themselves.<sup>[229]</sup> Civil War historian [James M. McPherson](#) stated that "A historian reading their testimony, however, will be convinced that they told several falsehoods."<sup>[230]</sup>

## Aftermath of the raid





Old John Brown's Career, 1860 poster

John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry was among the last in a series of events that led to the [American Civil War](#).<sup>[231]</sup> Southern slaveowners, hearing initial reports that hundreds of abolitionists were involved, were relieved the effort was so small, but feared other abolitionists would emulate Brown and attempt to lead slave rebellions.<sup>[232]</sup> Future Confederate President [Jefferson Davis](#) feared "thousands of John Browns".<sup>[233]</sup> Therefore, the South reorganized the decrepit militia system. These militias, well-established by 1861, became a ready-made [Confederate](#) army, making the South better prepared for war.<sup>[234]</sup>

Southern Democrats charged that Brown's raid was an inevitable consequence of the political platform of what they invariably called "the Black Republican Party". In light of the upcoming elections in November 1860, the Republicans tried to distance themselves as much as possible from Brown, condemning the raid and dismissing its leader as an insane fanatic. As one historian explains, Brown was successful in polarizing politics: "Brown's raid succeeded brilliantly. It drove a wedge through the already tentative and fragile Opposition–Republican coalition and helped to intensify the sectional polarization that soon tore the Democratic party and the Union apart."<sup>[234]</sup>

Many abolitionists in the North viewed Brown as a martyr, sacrificed for the sins of the nation. Immediately after the raid, [William Lloyd Garrison](#) published a column in [The Liberator](#), judging Brown's raid "well-intended but sadly misguided" and "wild and futile".<sup>[235]</sup> However, he defended Brown's character from detractors in the Northern and Southern press, and argued that those who supported the principles of the [American Revolution](#) could not consistently oppose Brown's raid. On the day Brown was hanged, Garrison reiterated the point in Boston: "whenever commenced, I cannot but wish success to all slave insurrections".<sup>[236]</sup>

[Frederick Douglass](#) believed that Brown's "zeal in the cause of my race was far greater than mine – it was as the burning sun to my taper light – mine was bounded by time, his stretched away to the boundless shores of eternity. I could live for the slave, but he could die for him."<sup>[237]</sup>